

# 2

# Scapegoating & Sacrifice

## Contagious violence

In archaic societies, the desire to acquire what another desires was an ever present source of rivalrous violence and, as violence by its mimetic nature is highly contagious, it presented a constant threat to the survival of the community. Entire communities would be wiped out in conflict over contested goods, property or positions of power as no mechanism existed to arbitrate in these conflicts. With no police force, judicial system or social contract to control it, violence was dispelled by a sacrificial rite, which evolved as an outlet of diffusion and containment. *“Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object.”*



**All against one  
instead of  
all against all**



<https://www.jesus-story.net/caiaphas-the-trial/>

Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said “You do not seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that **it is better for one man to die for the people**, than for the whole nation to be destroyed.”

*Jn 11:50*

Consequently, the build-up of violence in a community would be contained by projecting the violence onto someone or something, usually vulnerable, who could be a prisoner-of-war, tribal outcast, or person with physical deformities without connections within the community, thus eliminating the possibility of retaliation that would prolong or reignite the violence; in other words, a scapegoat.

The mechanism was akin to controlled burning to stop the outbreak of a greater bush fire. The scapegoat would then be sacrificed or banished from the community.

For Girard however, there was one fundamental element in the sacrificial mechanism that was crucial to its efficacy, and that was its essential **deception**.

It was imperative that the scapegoat be believed by the whole community to be the source of the violence; this lie or deception being the cornerstone of the whole sacrificial mechanism.

## Ambiguity

Once the scapegoat was identified and either expelled or killed, the effect on the group was a sense of unity, relief, and harmony. This was short-lived however, as the shared desires and resultant rivalries arose time and again, necessitating repetition of scapegoating acts. The scapegoat was therefore mistaken for an all-powerful benefactor as well as an evil threat. These opposite perceptions persisted side by side, resulting in an ambivalent apprehension of the “sacred” and the “gods”. They were seen as bringing peace as well as violence to the community.

The recurrence of fear, anger and disharmony in the face of natural disaster or communal rivalry and upheaval was met over millennia with countless repetitions of scapegoating.

## Ritual and Myth

Ritual sacrifice became the controlled re-staging of scapegoating events. Knowing that communal discord threatened the very existence of the group, ritual repetition of sacrificial killings developed. Accompanied by dance, chanting and re-enactment of the community crisis of violence which caused sacrificial events, liturgies developed as the basis for the origins of religion and culture. Narratives were woven over time to explain the events to succeeding generations.

These mythic stories shared in the deception of the original scapegoating act. They perpetuated the idea that the scapegoat was guilty and the groups who rid themselves of them were right to do so. In myths, the victims are always to blame and the communities are always innocent. However, the ambivalence of the “evil yet sacred” victim resulted in many myths depicting the victim as becoming one of the gods.

In myths, the violence of the scapegoating act is downplayed, transformed into an accident, or even non-existent. Where it is related in the tale, it is always justified. The scapegoat is always depicted as guilty.



Girard used the plays of Sophocles about Oedipus to illustrate themes of scapegoating. [Click here](#) for an animated version of the Oedipus myth. (11 minutes)



*We are used to the concept of “scapegoat” as it is found in Leviticus 16:1-34. Girard maintains that this expression of the process is very recent, growing from far more ancient practices over millennia.*

## Modern Scapegoats

### The Lottery

Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) was an American author who wrote many short stories in the genres of horror and mystery. Her 1948 disturbing story “The Lottery” depicts the scapegoating act in a contemporary setting.

[Click here](#) for the text.

[Click here](#) for a video version, 18 minutes.

### The Dreyfus Affair

Captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongfully convicted of treason in 1894 in France and spent seven years on Devil’s Island before being acquitted. His story epitomises scapegoating. There are two presentations here:

[The Dreyfus Affair](#) 3 min.

[Dreyfus Revisited: A Current Affair](#) 18 min.

Further resources:

#### Video

[The Invention of Blame](#)

Quirky, some good points, but weak on Christian reality. First 11 minutes only.

#### Audio

[Scapegoats and Sacrifices.](#)

Alan Saunders and Chris Fleming in *The Philosopher’s Zone* 25 minutes.

Includes transcript

#### Text

Girard: Excerpt - [The Scapegoat](#)

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